

COMMENTS AND NOTES

SOME PROPOSITIONS ABOUT THE PRESERVATION OF FARM LAND

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Here are some propositions about the preservation of farm land. Are they valid and meaningful?

1. The focus on land in preservation efforts tends to be misleading. It produces thoughts about how to keep a physical object intact, implies that farm character inheres in the land, and diverts attention from the ultimate objectives sought. Land as a physical object actually is very durable. Farming makes plain land into farm land, and farming is not durable. Ultimate objectives commonly include attractive pastoral scenes, food and open space. Farming is necessary to food production and to the maintenance of some kinds of pastoral scenes, but is not necessary to open space.
2. The preservation of farming is a much more complex undertaking than the preservation of a physical object.
3. Farming requires farmers, and continued farming requires certain behavior by farmers. If food and farm types of pastoral scenes are desired, proposals for preserving farm land must be evaluated in terms of their effects on farmer behavior.
4. A focus on the preservation of farm land also tends to limit concern to instances in which land is totally diverted to a nonfarm use. The construction of a new subdivision, factory, or shopping mall in a corn field or orchard is very impressive. However, the slow and inconspicuous infiltration to nonfarm uses into farming areas can discourage farmers from maintaining aggressive farm businesses and since nonfarm scatteration is widespread and growing rapidly, the debilitation of farming it produces can reduce food production more than the transfer of land to nonfarm uses at suburban margins.
5. Zoning has not demonstrated its ability to assure a supply of skillful, diligent and optimistic farmers in areas of nonfarm infiltration.
6. Zoning is not likely to hold the line at suburban fringes. Zoning ordinances once enacted have traditionally retreated before concentrated suburban pressure. Also, the people in many of the rural areas adjacent to suburbs refuse to enact zoning ordinances. Action at the state level is needed to put effective exclusive agricultural zoning in place. Such state action has been proposed as part of comprehensive state planning in many instances (note especially Vermont and New York) but has been rejected. The state proposals have endangered land use control autonomy in the suburbs, and therefore are unacceptable to suburbanities.
7. Farmers already are outnumbered in their home communities by nonfarmers over large areas of the East and there is no practical way to roll this back.
8. A large part of the new nonfarmers added each year to rural populations are the children of local nonfarmers. Nonfarm rural people are strongly attached to their rural lifestyle. The income earning capacity of most is too low to support life in the suburbs if they were to move to the city. City life for most would involve a location to the inner city, probably in rented accommodations in a relatively congested area. With this kind of urban alternative, nonfarm rural people will oppose strongly any attempts to remove them or even to prevent their children from joining them as rural nonfarm residents.
9. Rural nonfarm people will not be forced into cities by high gasoline prices. They can reduce other living costs to counterbalance rising gasoline prices by growing larger gardens, keeping livestock for their own use, enjoying less expensive forms of recreation, and burning wood they have or can buy standing nearby.
10. Urban to rural migrants in some instances are choosing rural life in preference to an open alternative in the suburbs. More often, however, they are retirees whose resources do not permit them an attractive urban alternative, or low income escapees who have sought refuge from the unhappiness promised by an advancing ghetto perimeter. An urban majority probably would vote against closing rural areas to further nonfarm settlement.
11. Farmers, too, oppose rural zoning. Partly this is traditional, partly it is because a few are speculators in addition to being farmers, but principally it is because farmers are afraid that once controls are introduced they will multiply to where they impinge heavily on them as well as on nonfarmers.
12. The elements in the present rural scene that adversely affect farmers and discourage aggressive farming in areas of nonfarm infiltration include:
 - a) High taxes that result from artificially high assessments and from high nonfarm demand for services.
 - b) Regulations and informal censures that increase costs.
 - c) Increasing liability exposure.
 - d) Trespass and vandalism.
 - e) Growing dependence upon the renting of farm land that has passed to speculators and speculating rural, nonfarm residents and the resulting low level of tenure security.
13. Farmers in both close-by areas and in more distant infiltration areas have welcomed programs for the government purchase of development rights. These programs have the potential for full and complete preservation but their cost is too high to be widely acceptable in all but highly affluent semi-suburban situations.
14. Programs to trade reduced taxes for temporary transfers of development rights have been acceptable to many farmers where tried. The results are less certain than the purchase of development rights but the costs are lower. State programs are more likely to be acceptable to tax payers than local ones, except where the nonfarm residents have high incomes.
15. Attempts to force developers to purchase development rights from farmers outside their development areas have not been successful.
16. Farm-value assessments have been widely sought by farmers and accepted by state legislatures. They help to assure farmers that they can recoup the costs of the new real estate improvements needed for aggressive farming.

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17. If assessments generally were on a probable sale price basis and if farms were accurately assessed at what they would sell for if placed on the market as units, farm-value assessments would provide no advantages in most major farming areas of the Northeast. As things stand, they help to correct assessing errors in some of those areas, though better means for doing this should be available.
18. Where farms actually could be sold for prices higher than farmers could pay out of farm income, farm value assessments can help to permit continued farming but cannot assure it.
19. The agricultural district program in New York has been widely accepted by farmers because:
 - a) It provides them some assurances beyond farm-value assessments that they can remain in an area if they wish.
 - b) These assurances apply throughout clearly designated areas whose boundaries have been determined largely by the farmers themselves.
20. New York agricultural districts cannot do more than increase the willingness of farmers to remain aggressive. They cannot hold the line against suburban growth any more than farm-value assessments or zoning, nor even prevent the particular farmers who receive high-priced offers for their farms in scatteration areas from selling for nonfarm uses.
21. Many of the factors that discourage farmers from being aggressive in areas of nonfarm infiltration are unaffected by any of the efforts made so far to preserve farm land.
22. Intimately intermingled heterogeneity is widespread in many rural areas and is increasing. A major challenge of the day is to devise institutional arrangements that reduce mutual interference among intermingled rural uses without trying to disentangle them geographically as cities have done. The focus in rural planning needs to be expanded far beyond just farm land preservation.